



## 2004 DNR Accessibility Survey Project

Maryland State Forest and Park Service &  
the Office of Fair Practices

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# **Final Report for the 2004 DNR Accessibility Survey Project**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is committed to the goal of “accessibility for all” and therefore commissioned this research project to evaluate the level of satisfaction that park users with mobility impairments feel in regards to current DNR accessibility efforts.

The Accessibility Survey Project was conducted from June through December 2004. The goal of this project was to gain a greater understanding of how well DNR is meeting the needs and concerns of park users with mobility impairments. Self-administered surveys were mailed to 299 randomly selected Maryland Access Pass holders. We received a 22% return rate of completed surveys, which is an average return rate for mail surveys. Of those respondents who returned completed surveys, 61% indicated that they wanted to further discuss their opinions and concerns about accessibility in the Maryland State Parks, indicating that this user group has specific ideas about how the parks that they use can be made more accessible for them and they desire to share that information with the people who can make those changes. In addition to the mail survey, several informal interviews were conducted with park users who self-identified as having a mobility impairment. The findings from the survey and the interviews were discussed more in-depth with a discussion group from the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues.

The survey project was co-sponsored by the Maryland DNR Office of Fair Practices (OFP) and the State Forest and Park Service, with the support of the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues. The project leader and primary researcher was the OFP Graduate Intern, Dianne Beer, Master of Applied Anthropology Graduate Candidate at the University of Maryland whose foci are tourism, recreation, leisure and disability.

While segments of the survey results indicate approximately a 75% satisfaction level with current accessibility efforts, it is also important to consider the context of the raw numbers from the survey. Other information gathered throughout the project (via ethnographic methods) indicates the need for improved efforts in future accessibility plans and programs. There are several recommendations that have emerged from the accessibility survey project to help guide the Maryland DNR in its goal of achieving “accessibility for all”. The intent is to produce some recommendations that are achievable and immediate and some that may be more challenging and long-term.

These initial recommendations are geared more toward manageable agency reform that can be used to send an important message to park users with disabilities; that accessibility is a priority to this agency.

- DNR should establish stronger channels of communication and feedback for users with disabilities. This will allow the comparison of the DNRs accessibility plans with the actual needs of the users. This should also include involving and inviting park users with disabilities to participate in accessibility projects in local areas/regions (since nobody knows what features and services they need better than they do).

- The experience, advice, and resources of the Advisory Council should be utilized in a more active way. An example that emerged in the focused group discussion included asking members of the Council to help begin the process of improving accessibility by participating in the initial step of collecting an inventory of information on all of the accessible features and services available at each park. This inventory would be dated, posted, and updated as necessary and would promote awareness of what is currently available, in terms of accessibility.
- It became evident throughout the research project that the source of negative experiences in the parks was not from lack of accessible features but rather from interactions with park employees who were not always sensitive to the accommodations necessary for park users with mobility impairments (particularly those whose disabilities are not overtly visible). Therefore, more intensive training at all levels of park and agency employees (volunteer, seasonal, NR police, park staff, park managers, etc.) in diversity and specifically in regards to disability accommodation and sensitivity is recommended.

While agency reform is an important step in improving the commitment to accessibility, there also needs to be a continued dedication to feasible physical adaptations in the long-term, such as:

- Bathrooms closer to activity areas.
- More reserved accessible parking in better locations.
- More alternatives within the parks for varying levels of ability.
- More distinct labeling on specifically accessible features for the benefit of park users with disabilities and to potentially serve as an educational opportunity for non-disabled park visitors.

Equally important, Maryland DNR needs to invest in further research into improving accessibility in the various areas of the DNR. Future studies should look at park users with different types of disabilities, such as blind, deaf and hard of hearing, and mentally disabled. Future research could even be extended to include caregivers and family members of park users with disabilities.

The Accessibility Survey Project was an important step for the DNR in moving closer to their goal of improved accessibility. I recommend that the DNR share the findings of this research project with the public to demonstrate their commitment to “accessibility for all”.

*I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to those individuals who participated in this project by completing the survey, volunteering for interviews, allowing me to observe you in the parks, and to all those who supported this project in their own ways. Thank you for your support and commitment to improved accessibility in the Maryland State Parks.*

## II. Project Description and Methods

The goal of this project was to facilitate a greater understanding of the satisfaction level felt by park users with mobility impairments with the accessibility currently offered in Maryland State Parks. This was achieved by engaging in a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The project followed a progression, which included mail surveys, site visits, one-on-one interviews, and focused group discussion.

### Scope of Study

It was decided that the scope of this study would be limited to park users who considered themselves to have a mobility impairment. The intent is for this to be a gateway study that leads to future research related to other types of disabilities.

### Limitations

The time and resources available to the agency and the researcher were the primary limits to this project.

### Mail Survey

After research and several meetings with the manager of the Office of Fair Practices and the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues, a series of questions were formulated for a mail survey related to accessibility and park usage. A copy of the survey can be found in **Appendix A**.

I coordinated with a representative from State Forest and Park Service (SFPS) who manages the Maryland Access Pass program. That representative had contact information for all the people who had applied for the Access Pass within the past two years. The sample was drawn from this source, as it guaranteed that the recipients of the survey would meet the two minimum “membership” criteria: they had a disability and they were very likely to have visited at least one state park. Due to privacy concerns, I was not allowed to see the actual contact information, so the SFPS representative, at my request, randomly selected 300 hundred names from the dataset of individuals applying for an Access Pass within the past two years by selecting every third name. It was decided that we would send the survey to 300 randomly chosen Access Pass holders because 300 was a feasible target within our budgetary constraints.

The design was such that the 300 individuals would be introduced to the aim of the project (a copy of the introductory letter can be found in **Appendix A**), asked to complete the enclosed survey (which can also be found in **Appendix A**), and they would be offered the opportunity to participate in a follow up informal interview regarding their opinions and concerns about accessibility in the state parks by completing and sending in the enclosed contact card (a copy of the contact card can be found in **Appendix A**). We requested that they send the contact card separately from the survey, to help maintain the anonymity of the survey results.

Due to an unfortunate logistical oversight, 299 survey packets were mailed out. Six packets were returned with incorrect addresses. The result was a 22% return rate of completed surveys, which is standard for mail surveys. The spreadsheet of survey response data can be found in **Appendix B**.

### Site Visits

After the survey packets were mailed out, I began visiting several parks to start forming a context for the survey results and potential interviews, so that I could see first-hand the lay out of some of the parks and what they considered to be their accessible features. I specifically visited several of the most frequently mentioned parks from survey respondents. On several occasions, I accompanied the DNR ADA coordinator on “self-assessment” visits. Following is a list of parks that I visited for reasons other than conducting interviews with park users with disabilities.

- Sandy Point State Park – with ADA coordinator for “self-assessment”
- Greenwell State Park – with ADA coordinator for “self-assessment”
- Catoctin Mountain National Park – for group participant observation with United Cerebral Palsy/The League for People with Disabilities - Camp Greentop
- Cunningham Falls State Park (William Houck Area, NOT Manor Area)
- Rocky Gap State Park – with ADA coordinator for “self-assessment”
- Patapsco State Park – with ADA coordinator for “self-assessment”
- Gunpowder State Park – with ADA coordinator for “self-assessment”
- Myrtle Grove Wildlife Management Area – at the recommendation of an interview informant

During the site visits, I often had the opportunity to speak with park managers and rangers, as well as other park personnel. The overall feeling that I perceived was that everyone that I spoke with at the parks was concerned with accessibility and had a strong desire to deliver the best services in the most efficient ways. Every park I visited had at least some features and facilities that would be considered accessible for mobility impaired visitors.

### One-On-One Informal Interviews

Once a bulk of the surveys were returned, I began contacting those individuals who had also sent in a contact card, indicating they wanted to discuss accessibility in the state parks beyond what had been covered in the survey. There were many individuals who wanted to discuss the matter of accessibility in state parks further; 61% of those who returned completed surveys also returned the completed contact card. In total, I conducted nine personal interviews at state and regional parks. At some locations I interviewed more than one individual, and some interviews took place at more than one location. A copy of sample guiding interview questions can be found in **Appendix D**. The interviews evoked many compelling themes, which are outlined in the Handout for the Advisory Council Update in **Appendix E**. Below is a list of parks that I conducted interviews at, who was interviewed, and for what activity the individual primarily used that park. More specific recommendations that came out of the interviews (as well as a few additional comments added on from the survey respondents) can be found in the “recommendation” section.

- **Assateague Island, Subject:** 1 female, **Primary Use:** Camping
- **Black Hill Regional Park (MNCPPC), Subject:** 1 male, **Primary Use:** General Day Use
- **Choptank Fishing Pier, Subjects:** 1 male, 1 female, **Primary Use:** Fishing
- **Deep Creek Lake, Subject:** 1 male, **Primary Use:** Boating/Fishing
- **Janes Island, Subject:** 1 female, **Primary Use:** General Day Use
- **Morgan Run NEA, Subject:** 1 male, **Primary Use:** Fishing
- **New Germany, Subject:** 1 male, **Primary Use:** Fishing
- **Smallwood, Subject:** 1 male, **Primary Use:** Cycling

#### Focused Group Discussion

At the behest of the manager of the Office of Fair Practices, I organized a two-hour discussion group with representatives from the Advisory Council on Disability Issues, Office of Fair Practices, and State Forest and Park Service. A copy of the agenda, which was used to guide the conversation, as well as the handout that was given to the discussion group participants, can be found in **Appendix F**. The results of the discussion group will be discussed further in the “recommendation” section of this report. The consensus was that an important part of improving accessibility at the Department of Natural Resources would include a greater level of involvement and accountability on behalf of the Advisory Council on Disability Issues.

### **III. Recommendations and Proposed Implementation**

The recommendations presented here are a result of reflection upon the information collected from surveys, site visits, group participant observation, interviews, and group discussion throughout this project.

#### Five Primary Recommendations

After evaluating the survey data and supplementing that with the knowledge gained from written comments on the surveys, interviewing with park users with disabilities, informally speaking with park personnel, and visiting parks to gain first-hand familiarity with available “accessible” features, several themes emerged for improving accessibility and commitment to accessibility in the DNR system.

Some of these recommendations are more geared toward manageable agency reform that can be used to send an important message to park users with disabilities; that accessibility is a priority to this agency. Agency reform is an important step in improving the commitment to accessibility, however, there also needs to be a continued dedication to feasible physical adaptations for the long-term, and some of these recommendations are focused more on that topic. Many of these recommendations are intended to improve accessibility in parks for all park users, not just those with mobility impairments.

These recommendations are not listed in a specific order, nor should any one recommendation have priority over another. Graphs and survey data analysis that support these recommendations can be found in **Appendix C**.

#### **1. Establish stronger channels of communication and feedback for users with disabilities.**

With 61% of survey respondents indicating that they desired to further discuss their opinions and concerns about accessibility in the Maryland State Parks, this is a strong indicator that park users with disabilities have clear ideas about how the DNR could improve access to meet their needs and they want to share that information. Also, through personal interviews with park users with disabilities it was often mentioned that they had often had suggestions for improving accessibility in the parks and were never sure who to tell or how to get the information into the hands of the decision-makers. By establishing some means of distinct two-way communication (between the user and the appropriate representative at the DNR – park manager, ADA coordinator, etc.) this will help supplement the advice of the Advisory Council by hearing directly from the users how to best improve accessibility. Having some sort of feedback system (which could be as simple as a “suggestions” box prominently displayed in each park) will also help promote a sense of accountability by demonstrating that recommendations can be made, recognized, and accordingly addressed, if appropriate. This may also increase the sense of “ownership” that park users with disabilities feel towards the DNR properties they use.

Part of the plan for improved communication could include inviting park users with disabilities to become more involved in the parks that they visit most often. Interviews suggest that many park users with disabilities are “loyal” to a few parks that they visit for specific activities (i.e. this park for fishing, that park for camping, etc.); the survey data reinforces this and also implies

that most park visitors with disabilities primarily visit parks in the region in which they live (an implication of not being able to travel long distances due to the nature of their disability). This information can be interpreted to mean that these users would be interested in attending regional “feedback” sessions at parks. Several informants also suggested that local park users with disabilities should be brought in to consult on accessibility projects. For example, consulting a local fisherman with a disability on where the best place on a lake would be for an accessible fishing pier (i.e. not just putting it where it’s convenient, but where there are good/equitable fishing conditions).

## **2. The experience, advice, and resources of the Advisory Council should be utilized in a more active way.**

Through experience in meetings with the Advisory Council and more focused group discussion with various members of the Advisory Council, it became evident that the members of the Advisory Council constitute an outstanding resource that could be more effectively utilized to help promote the goal of “accessibility for all”. During focused group discussion, several recommendations emerged as to ways that the Advisory Council could take a more active roll in promoting better accessibility as a priority within the DNR.

One suggestion was to ask members of the Advisory Council to help begin work on conducting a current “baseline” inventory of all of the accessible features and adaptive equipment that each park has. This project would help reconnect the Advisory Council directly with the parks and what they have to offer in terms of accessibility, it would help make personnel and managers aware of the Advisory Council, it’s mission, and the resources it has to offer, and it would serve to promote the idea of accessibility as a priority. The intent would be that each park would have such an inventory, with the date that it was most recently updated, posted on billboards and/or in visitors centers/park offices/ranger stations for park users with disabilities to review.

It was also suggested that the Advisory Council try to become more involved, through various channels, in the training of park personnel for ADA and disability awareness and sensitivity. This will be further discussed in the next recommendation and also in the focused group discussion outcomes section.

## **3. More disability awareness and sensitivity training for all park personnel, at all levels.**

Survey responses suggest that there is more-or-less consistent satisfaction with the actual physical features that are accessible in the parks. However, when asked in interviews whether they had an experience that made them feel like not coming back to a park, the most common experiences related had to do with a negative interaction with a park employee, due to insensitivity to or unawareness of the individuals disability. It became clear that most of the individuals interviewed could not distinguish between a ranger, park staff, volunteer, NR police, etc. But it was clear that the individuals that I spoke with who considered themselves mobility impaired, yet did not always utilize a wheelchair (hence their disability may not be immediately visually perceptible), were not always accommodated in the same ways and had had at least one (but perhaps only one) negative person-to-person interaction with a DNR employee in a park setting. While it would be ideal to utilize training targeted to the levels/groups that are most

associated with these negative interactions, as previously mentioned, for the informants, it was difficult to discern between levels and types of park employees. The DNR is responsible for everyone associated with and representing them, including volunteers. Therefore, more training across the board seems to be the most appropriate response to this concern.

During the focused group discussion, it was suggested that the Office of Fair Practices and the Advisory Council might have the opportunity to help offer ADA training including disability awareness and sensitivity and appropriate/reasonable accommodation. This opportunity comes in the form of training new employees through the merger in a type of “stewardship school”. However, this opportunity only allows access to new employees. It would be advisable to work on alternative means to communicating important information about disability awareness and sensitivity throughout the park system. This could include regional workshops and trainings for volunteers, seasonal employees, and other personnel, a printed manual that individuals could review on their own, and/or an updated video training.

#### **4. Continued dedication to feasible physical accessibility improvements for the long-term at each park, WMA, and NEA.**

While agency reform is an important step in improving the commitment to accessibility, there also needs to be a continued dedication to making physical feature improvements in all of the parks. Through the surveys and interviews, it became apparent that park users with disabilities use different parks for different reasons (i.e. Rocky Gap for fishing, Assateague Island for camping, etc.). Later in this section, several recommendations that were suggested either during the course of an interview or through written comments on surveys will be listed to offer an idea of some of the concerns of current park users with disabilities. Here I offer several suggestions that were recurring themes throughout the project and which could be improvements in all parks.

- Bathrooms closer to activity areas.
- More reserved accessible parking in better locations.
- More alternatives within the parks for varying levels of ability.
- More distinct labeling on specifically accessible features for the benefit of park users with disabilities and to potentially serve as an educational opportunity for non-disabled park visitors.

Part of working to improve the accessible physical features of a park includes having a mindset that is open enough to consider the type of users that will be interacting with those features. For instance, having a mobility impairment does not necessarily imply that an individual uses a wheelchair. Perhaps they use a cane or a walker, or they pace themselves and don’t use assistive devices; these are important things to keep in mind if the DNR thinks it is meeting expectations of being accessible by making features only “wheelchair friendly”.

#### **5. Further research is necessary.**

This project was conceived and intended as a gateway project. Both the Manager of the Office of Fair Practices and the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues have recognized that there are several questions that could not be answered within the scope of this project. Additionally,

this project did not deal with accessibility concerns related to individuals with types of disability other than mobility impairment, such as blind and sight impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, mental disabilities, and/or multiple disabilities, which also need to be addressed. The research did reveal that often, park users with mobility impairments visit Maryland State Parks with friends or family and one Advisory Council member suggested that there could be a lot of useful information to be gained by surveying and interviewing the friends and family of park users with disabilities. There is also great potential to expand the scope of future related research to include people with disabilities who are not currently park users to find out why they are not using the parks and how we can use that information to further improve accessibility for all.

#### Recommendations and Comments from Interviews and Surveys

These comments have been included because they are specific recommendations relating to specific concerns in specific parks, from people with disabilities who use these parks for various activities. This should help to demonstrate that the people who are using the parks have opinions about how they could be more accessible to them.

##### **Assateague Island**

**Subject:** 1 female

**Primary Use:** Camping

- Electricity is part of accessibility and there are no electric campsites reserved for people with disabilities; there should be some electric sites reserved for people with disabilities.
- Sometimes closeness to a park feature is more important than closeness to a bathroom, if you're in a camper.
- The bathrooms are awkwardly placed, like at the top of a hill.
- There are not enough park personnel (would feel safer if there were more).

##### **Choptank Fishing Pier**

**Subjects:** 1 male, 1 female

**Primary Use:** Fishing

- Take out the top rail every five sections or so, that way we can see and rest our fishing pole on it.
- Repave to make it smoother.
- There needs to be more trashcans out here.
- Accessible port-a-potties are not very accessible, and they need to be more clearly marked/labeled.

##### **Deep Creek Lake**

**Subject:** 1 male

**Primary Use:** Boating/Fishing

- Need more close parking for vehicles with a boat trailer for disabled (but it's great that they've got some).
- Need another boat ramp.
- More lighting all around, and it needs to be turned on more often and earlier.
- Need more trashcans.
- Need a fish cleaning station by the boat ramp.
- They should hand out a map that clearly marks the accessible features to everyone at the gate.
- More public use picnic tables.
- Bathrooms closer to the boat launch.
- More patrolling by the Rangers.

**Janes Island****Subject:** 1 female**Primary Use:** General Day Use

- Phones on trails or some other way to communicate with Rangers or other park personnel while out on the trails, in case of an emergency.
- More trashcans by playground/picnic shelter area.
- Benches by playground.
- Bleachers by ball field.
- More reserved parking, including reserved for expectant mothers.
- Alternative for the inaccessible observation tower.

**Morgan Run NEA****Subject:** 1 male**Primary Use:** Fishing

- Could use a bench, a port-a-potty, and a picnic table.
- Needs a boardwalk path to other areas of the river.
- It's situated at a part of the river that is not the best for fishing.
- Non-disabled people are using features that are specifically set-aside for people with disabilities.

**New Germany****Subject:** 1 male**Primary Use:** Fishing

- Needs bathrooms by the "accessible fishing pier".
- Needs benches at (and on) the accessible fishing pier.
- Needs picnic tables, trashcans, and a water fountain by accessible pier.
- Could make the paved path wider so a car could fit on it and make a few accessible parking spots closer to the pier.

**Smallwood****Subject:** 1 male**Primary Use:** Cycling

- Needs more bathrooms.
- Should be positioned as not just a park for boaters (in marketing terms).
- Needs more water fountains.
- There needs to be more patrolling by Rangers.

**Points from Focused Group Discussion**

In mid-November, 2004, I led a focused group discussion with the goal of reviewing some of the outstanding information produced from the project and then brainstorming on what the DNR could feasibly do as the next steps. A copy of the agenda for the discussion as well as the handout that was given to each participant can be found in **Appendix F**.

The group discussed the idea of shuffling accessible resources among the parks (i.e. looking at the possibility of reallocating beach wheelchairs from Cunningham Falls where they have not been used, in the recollection of one of the Rangers, for at least the past three years, to Assateague Island where they don't have enough beach wheelchairs to meet the demand). This was generally accepted as a good idea, with the exception that perhaps some of the equipment had been donated by a "Friends of..." park organization and in that case it might not be

appropriate or feasible to move those resources. This discussion led into the subject of whether park visitors with disabilities were aware of the accessible features and adaptive equipment available to them at each park. According to the survey results, less than 15% of respondents have used the DNR website to reserve an accessible feature and information from several interviews suggests that some park users with disabilities don't directly use computers/internet to gather information, but prefer to get information at the actual parks (see **Appendix C**). Which also led the group to question whether each park had a clear idea or listing of what accessible features and adaptive equipment they had.

Most of the ensuing discussion was surrounding the idea that improving the DNRs commitment to accessibility would likely come in small, manageable steps. The next manageable and logical step, which we discussed, would be to conduct an inventory update for all of the DNR managed properties, so that there could be current information on what is available at each park (and wildlife management area and natural environment area). This current information would be posted at the "entrance" or main park office and on billboards in each park so that park users with disabilities could have a central location with up-to-date information on what is available and park personnel would also have a clear idea of what accessible features are currently available in their parks. Also, this information would be used to update the park accessibility information currently posted on the DNR website (which has recently shown that information to be of questionable reliability). The inventory posted would be dated as the baseline and the intent would be to update the inventory annually.

The discussion group recognized that the task of conducting such an inventory would be taxing on the park employees, who already balance many priorities. It was then suggested that volunteer members of the Advisory Council who are interested in being more involved, in a hands-on sense could take on this responsibility. The members of the Advisory Council present at the discussion felt this would be a good opportunity to strengthen commitment to the Council and give its members more responsibility. However, it was also noted that this effort would not be sustainable unless some sort of per diem or mileage reimbursement could be offered for the Council members who volunteered to conduct such inventory visits. It was also suggested that it could be possible to look to student volunteers from local universities or DNR interns to conduct part of the inventory "surveys". It became evident that if we wanted to initiate the inventory project and use resources other than the existing park personnel (such as members of the Advisory Council) a proposal, budget, and structure for the project would have to be created and grant money would need to be secured.

We also discussed the inaccuracies of some of the information presented on the DNR website about what accessible features were offered at each park. This led to a stimulating discussion of whether what DNR is saying is accessible is actually accessible? If not, who is it accessible to? It was suggested that we look at making a distinction between "usability" and "accessibility". It also came up that accessible features should, ideally, be dispersed throughout each park, to meet different needs and wants.

Due to interest in the topic of the inventory process, the discussion group had limited time to discuss other important ideas related to accessibility and DNR. Here are some of the other ideas that were touched on during the discussion:

- DNR should tap in to other available resources, including the “Friends of...” organizations to help with accessibility projects.
- The Office of Fair Practices and the Advisory Council should have more meetings with the Engineering department to help keep accessibility (in all of its incarnations- not just accessibility for wheelchair users) as a priority.
- Accessible projects should be enhanced with additional funding for maintenance and updates/upgrades over time.
- There should be more ADA and sensitivity training for all employees and volunteers with the DNR. The Council should also be used as a resource for this type of training. This point continued into a discussion of working to get OFP and the Advisory Council into an integral part of the training of new hires from the merger (something like stewardship schools).
- The Advisory Council could also take a more active role by hosting feedback sessions, regionally, for park users with disabilities at the parks.
- The OFP needs to work with the four regional teams to help encourage incorporation of accessibility into their mindsets. OFP could introduce the Advisory Council as a resource for the regional teams.

The discussion ended with a positive overall impression. It was suggested that a few people from the Advisory Council keep up the idea of starting the inventory project and start a list of things to do for the Advisory Council.